Transfer of Westslope Cutthroat Trout Within the Thompson River Watershed

Environmental Assessment

August 2020

Prepared by: Ryan Kreiner
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
5427 Highway 200
Thompson Falls, MT 59873

I. Description of Proposed Action

A. Description of Water Body and Action

Receiving Waters:

Name: Bear Creek
Location: T23N, R26W, Section 9
County: Sanders

Name: Murr Creek
Location: T25N, R25W, Section 18
County: Flathead

Name: Shroder Creek
Location: T25N, R26W, Section 16
County: Flathead

Donating Waters:

Name: Chippy Creek
Location: T24N, R26W, Section 27
County: Sanders

Name: WF Thompson River
and Tributaries
Location: T24N, R26W, Section 32
County: Sanders

Name: Fishtrap Creek
and Tributaries
Location: T25N, R28W, Section 21
County: Sanders

Name: Big Rock Creek
Location: T24N, R25W, Section 8
County: Sanders

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to transfer pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout from populations threatened by hybridization into fishless streams above natural waterfall barriers in order to preserve local genetics and increase secured habitat of this species. Over the next five years, FWP would transfer up to 1,500 Westslope Cutthroat Trout from three donor populations into three fishless streams within the Thompson River drainage.

Narrative Summary

The Thompson River is the largest tributary to the lower Clark Fork River below its confluence with the Flathead River (Figure 1). Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is proposing to transfer pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout from up to four tributary streams within the Thompson River drainage into adjacent waters with fishless zones above natural barriers (Figure 2). Barriers have or will be confirmed by FWP staff as having no fish present above significant waterfalls. Westslope Cutthroat Trout are native to the Thompson River drainage but numbers have been greatly reduced due primarily to hybridization, competition, or predation by non-native species. Pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout still exist in multiple streams within the Thompson River drainage, but over 95% of those populations are threatened by advancing non-native trout species.

Over the next five years, FWP proposes to transfer up to 1,500 Westslope Cutthroat Trout into three fishless streams from up to four donor populations in the Thompson River drainage (Figure 2). Three probable donor populations were chosen based on recent genetic analysis and perceived threat of hybridization (Chippy Creek, Fishtrap Creek and tributaries, West Fork Thompson River and tributaries, Big Rock Creek; Kovach 2019.) Transfers would be broken into separate events with between 100-500 fish transferred to a single population at a time. If successful, this project would create up to 14 miles of secure Westslope Cutthroat Trout habitat using localized genetics. Newly established populations would then contribute Westslope Cutthroat Trout to downstream fisheries through natural migration and could serve as donor populations for future transfers to establish new populations elsewhere.

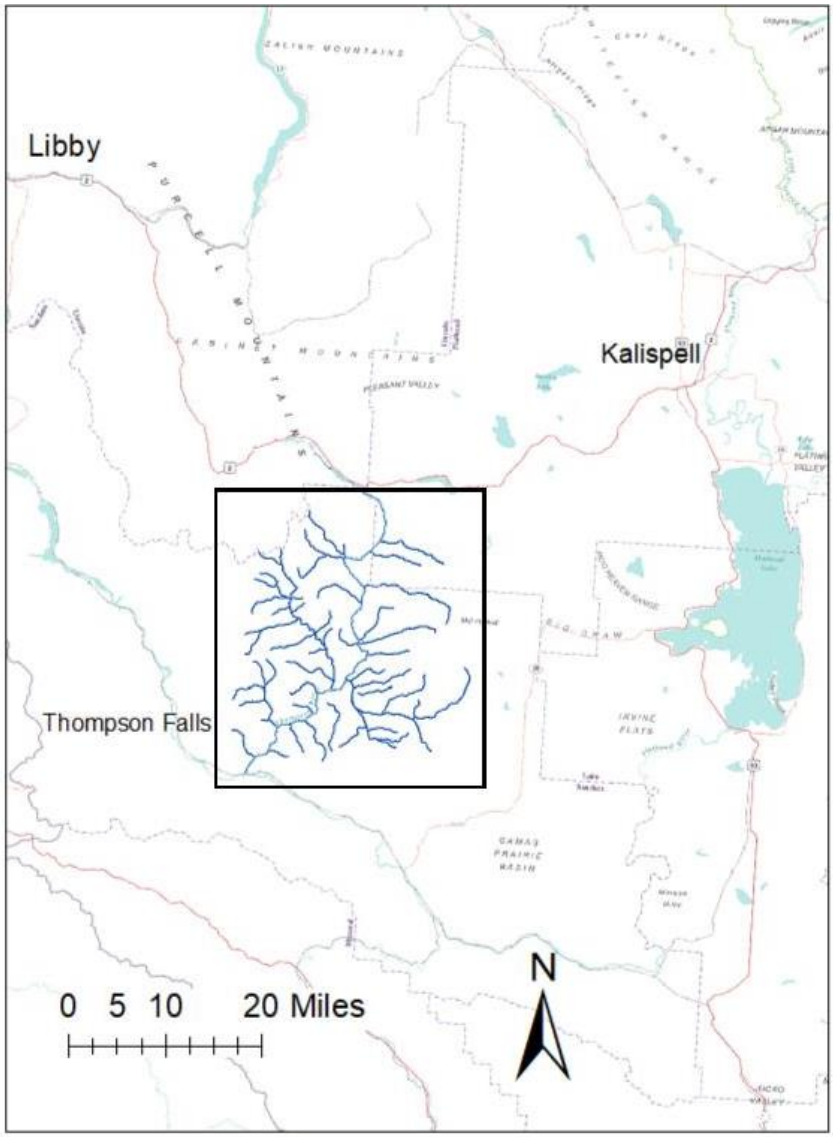

Figure 1. The Thompson River drainage in Northwest Montana.

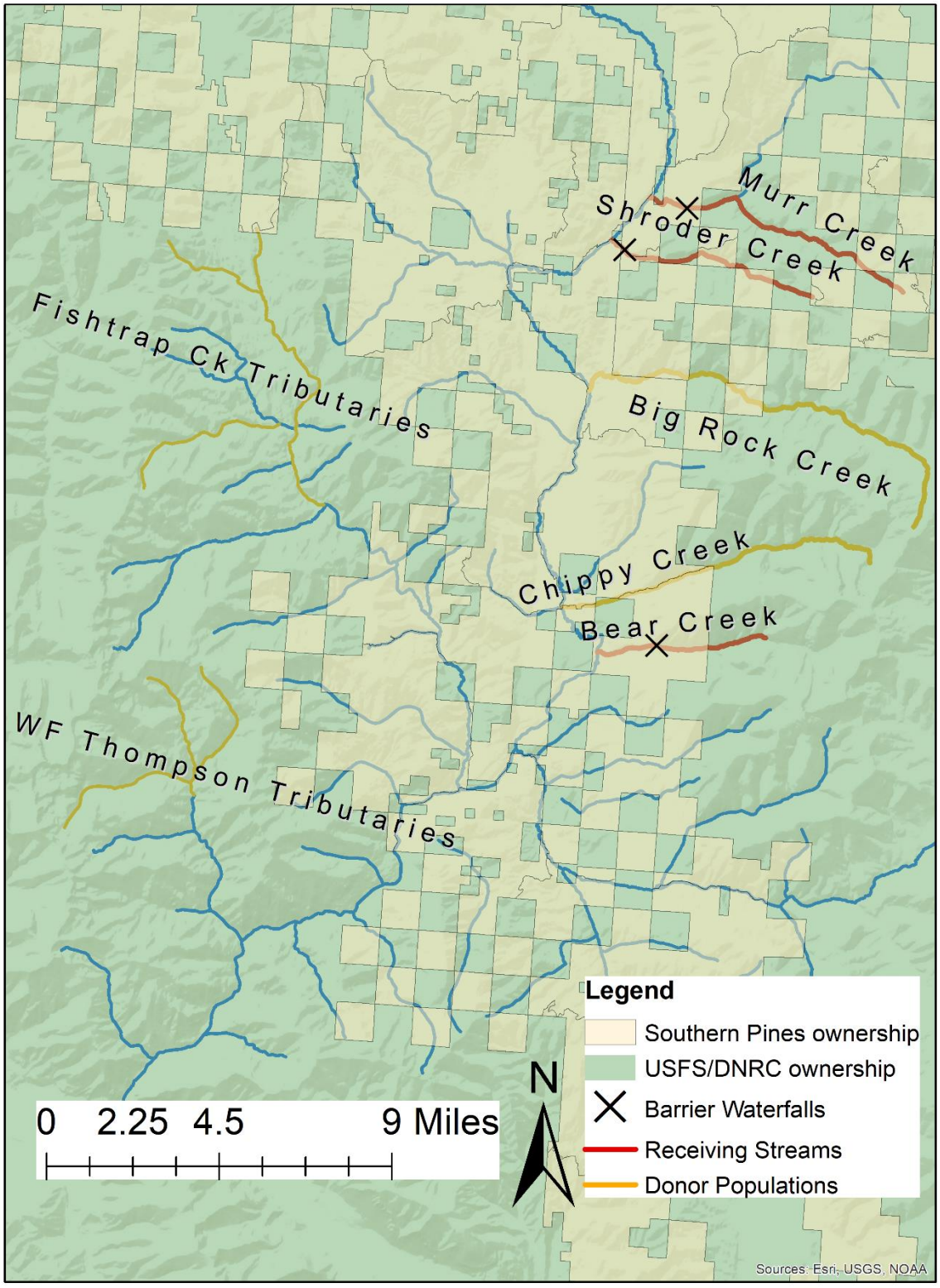

Figure 2. The upper Thompson River with tributary streams being considered for a transfer of Westslope Cutthroat Trout.

B. Need For Action

Hybridization with Rainbow Trout is one of the greatest threats to Westslope Cutthroat Trout persistence in today's climate (Muhlfeld et al. 2014). In the Thompson River drainage in Northwest Montana, introduced Rainbow Trout were the dominant mainstem trout species by the 1980s and native Westslope Cutthroat Trout had been reduced to less than 1% of the population in the mainstem river (Kreiner and Terrazas 2018). Pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout still exist in many of the Thompson River tributaries but nearly all populations (>95%) are threatened by advancing hybridization (Kreiner and Terrazas 2019). Documented hybridization has advanced farther up tributary streams over the past 30 years including above what were previously believed to be fish barriers (Leary 1994, Kovach 2019). Additionally, non-native Brown and Brook trout are moving farther up tributary streams and are known to outcompete native cutthroat trout elsewhere in Montana (Shepard 2004, Al-Chokhachy and Sepulveda 2019).

Hybridization with Rainbow Trout has been documented in Chippy Creek up to river mile (RM) 2.5, in Fishtrap Creek up to RM 15.8, and in West Fork Thompson River up to RM 4.6 (Kovach 2019, Kreiner and Terrazas 2020). Above this, genetically diverse populations of pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout still exist but are not secure from advancing hybridization. Adjacent to these streams, Bear Creek, Murr Creek, and Shroder Creek have a combined 14 miles of fishless habitat available above natural waterfall barriers (Figure 2). Transfer of pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout from available donor populations into fishless habitat would greatly increase the amount of secure cutthroat trout habitat in the Thompson River. It would also help to preserve unique local genetics of Westslope Cutthroat Trout from several populations under the threat of hybridization.

For a five-year duration, FWP proposes to transfer up to 1,500 (100-500 per year) genetically pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout from donor populations into fishless habitat of three adjacent tributary streams. Establishment of new populations of genetically pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout has been identified as a beneficial method of preservation for this species into the future (FWP 2007).

II. Impacts of the Proposed Action

We completed an Environmental Assessment Checklist that examines the full range of potential impacts on the human and physical environment. The following narrative provides detailed information on potential impacts to resources affected by the proposed action.

A. Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Changes in diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species

The proposed action would introduce Westslope Cutthroat Trout to fishless reaches of Bear Creek, Murr Creek, and Shroder Creek, which constitutes a change in diversity and abundance of this native game species. This alteration would be beneficial to Westslope Cutthroat Trout and is consistent with goals and objectives of conservation planning for the fish (FWP 2007).

2. Changes in the diversity of abundance of nongame species

Introduction of fish into fishless waters has potential to negatively affect species with an aquatic life history stage. Amphibians and aquatic invertebrates are the taxa with the greatest likelihood of being affected. Determining the potential effects on invertebrates and amphibians involves evaluating the potential for Bear Creek and Murr Creek to support aquatic life history stages of species that may be intolerant of sympatry with fish. The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) website presents range, life history, and habitat preference information used in evaluating potential effects on amphibians.

Coeur d'Alene (CDA) Salamanders *Plethodon idahoensis* have been documented in springs at the headwaters of Bear Creek (MNHP). However, this species is not likely to be affected by an introduction of Westslope Cutthroat Trout for several reasons. First, they are typically found in very steep sites unlikely to be occupied by fish (BCME 2015). CDA salamanders can live in spring seeps, waterfall spray, or in streamside habitat (Wilson 1991). The first two habitat types have comprised over 80% of the observations of this species in Idaho and Montana and are unlikely to be occupied by fish. Salamanders may interact with fish in streamside habitat, although Groves (1988) observed that CDA salamanders were located on the edge of streams beneath moist rocks, not in the stream itself and rarely found immediately adjacent to flowing water. Finally, CDA salamanders are terrestrial breeders and have no aquatic larval stage (BCME 2015)

Rocky Mountain tailed frogs are common in many of the tributary streams in the upper Thompson River including all potential donor and receiving populations. Although cutthroat trout may prey on tailed frog larvae, the two species co-exist throughout their range including in all potential donor and receiving streams (below the barriers). It is possible that densities of tailed frog tadpoles may be reduced in sections of stream with newly established Westslope Cutthroat Trout populations, but this will not reduce their overall range. Tailed frogs can occupy higher gradient tributaries than trout, so there will continue to be allopatric populations of tailed frogs in some of the steeper tributaries upstream of the receiving streams. Tailed frogs in downstream populations will not be impacted as fish are already present there.

Table 1: Amphibians potentially occurring within the project area

Order	Common Name	Scientific Name
Anura	Rocky Mountain Tailed Frog	*Ascaphus montanus*
Caudata	Coeur d'Alene salamander	*Plethodon idahoensis*
Ranidae	Columbia Spotted Frog	*Rana luteiventris*

No Columbia spotted frogs were documented during initial fisheries surveys of the proposed receiving streams, but they may be present. Their presence has been documented elsewhere in the Thompson River drainage. Columbia spotted frogs co-exist with trout throughout their range including within the Thompson River. Additionally, Columbia spotted frogs co-exist with other fish which are more predatory than Westslope Cutthroat Trout (e.g., Bull Trout, Brown Trout). If frogs are present in proposed receiving streams, their larvae may be susceptible to predation by newly introduced fish. However, the introduction of Westslope Cutthroat Trout will not likely result in significant reductions in Columbia spotted frog abundances.

Effects on macroinvertebrates would likely be not significant. Of macroinvertebrates occurring in montane streams in Montana, none have been found to be intolerant of coexisting with fish, and presence of fish can even increase diversity of macroinvertebrate communities (Dan Gustafson, Montana State University, personal communication). David Stagliano of MNHP affirmed Dr. Gustafson's conclusions.

3. Introduction of new species into an area?

Westslope Cutthroat Trout are native to all three receiving streams; however, waterfalls have excluded all fish from upper reaches of these streams. This project would introduce Westslope Cutthroat Trout into historically fishless waters, but within its native range. This type of range expansion is among the conservation priorities designed to stem declines of cutthroat trout in Montana when the action will not have detrimental effects on other species (FWP 2007).

In order to monitor long-term effects of this project, FWP will establish 2-3 electrofishing monitoring sites. Population estimates will be calculated on a periodic basis and compared to neighboring streams of equal size. Additional genetic monitoring will be conducted at five-year intervals after establishment of the new population and compared to the genetic structure of donor populations. If genetic indices such as allelic richness decline, additional supplementation may be necessary in the future. Finally, donor populations will be monitored closely to ensure that removal of Westslope Cutthroat does not impact genetic diversity or hasten the shift towards non-native species composition. To minimize impacts to donor populations, no more than 25% of the estimated linear abundance should be removed from the population. In Chippy Creek this means that 50 WCT may be removed per 100 m. In the Fishtrap Creek and West Fork Thompson River populations, only 6-8 may be removed per 100 m.

4. Will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened or endangered species.

A search of the MHP database for species of special concern likely to occur in the township and range encompassing potential receiving waters are: wolverine (Gulo gulo), grizzly bears (Ursos arctos), Bull Trout (Salvelinus confluentus), and Westslope Cutthroat Trout. Aside from the brief, periodic presence of field crews in this relatively remote area, this project would have no

effect on terrestrial mammal species. Westslope Cutthroat Trout would benefit with an expansion in miles of secure stream occupied. Bull Trout are present in the general project area including two donor streams but are absent from all receiving streams. The historic ranges of Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout have considerable overlap and these species co-exist throughout. Bull trout will not be negatively impacted by this project.

5. List any federal or state permits required.

FWP requires approval of a wild fish transfer request, which is submitted to the FWP's Fish Health Committee. In order to receive approval, donor populations need to be tested for fish pathogens. Chippy Creek was tested and certified as disease-free in 2019 (Cordes 2019). Fishtrap Creek and West Fork Thompson River have been previously tested (i.e., 2014 or earlier). Fish transfer activities would follow the FWP wild fish transfer policy and any conditions would be specified by the committee.

III. Discussion of Reasonable Alternatives

A. No Action

Under this action, no transfer of fish to Bear Creek, Murr Creek, or Shroder Creek above waterfalls would occur, and these reaches would remain fishless. Over time, local Westslope Cutthroat Trout populations in unprotected donor populations will likely be lost to hybridization.

B. Proposed Action

Under the proposed action and preferred alternative, genetically pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout would be transferred to fishless reaches of Bear Creek, Murr Creek, or Shroder Creek in the upper Thompson River drainage. This would preserve local cutthroat trout genetics in up to 14 miles of secured habitat. These populations would provide a source of fish to augment downstream populations. In addition, this secure population would provide brood stock of locally adapted fish for reintroduction into other streams in the drainage should there be a need in the future.

IV. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

A. Evaluation of Significance Criteria and Identification of the Need for an EIS

Evaluation of potential impacts on the physical and human environment in IV Environmental Assessment Checklist provides the basis for determining the need for an environmental impact statement (EIS), which is a more rigorous evaluation of potential impacts to human health and the environment from the proposed action. If evaluation of these significance criteria suggest the proposed action would result in significant impacts, an EIS would be required.

This environmental review demonstrates that the impacts of this proposed project are not significant. The proposed action would benefit Westslope Cutthroat Trout in the Thompson River watershed with minimal impact on the physical, biological, or the human environment.

B. Level of Public Involvement

Several factors influence the appropriate level of public involvement for a given proposed action. Risks to human health, the environment, local economics, as well as the seriousness of the environmental issues are key considerations. This project will include a 30-day public comment period.

1.1.2. Public Comments

The public will be informed of the potential project through press releases in local newspapers and through a notice on FWP's website.

Send comments to:

Jason Blakney
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
5427 Highway 200
Thompson Falls, MT 59873
(406) 382-3033
jblakney@mt.gov

1.1.2. Parties Responsible for Preparation of the EA

Ryan Kreiner
Fisheries Biologist
Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
5427 Highway 200
Thompson Falls, MT 59873
rkreiner@mt.gov

V. Literature Cited

Al-Chokhachy, R.K. and A.J. Sepulveda. 2019. Impacts of nonnative brown trout on Yellowstone cutthroat trout in a tributary stream. North American Journal of Fisheries Management. 39: 17-28.

B.C. Ministry of Environment (BCME). 2015. Management plan for the Coeur d'Alene Salamander (Plethodon idahoensis) in British Columbia. B.C. Ministry of Environment, Victoria, BC. 23 pp.

Cordes, R. 2019. Lower Clark Fork River Basin Pathogen Survey 2014 and 2019. Bozeman Fish Health Center; United States Fish and Wildlife Serveice. Prepared for Avista Corporation, NorthWestern Energy, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks. 2007. Memorandum of understanding and conservation agreement for Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Yellowstone cutthroat trout in Montana.

Groves, C. R. 1988. Status and distribution of the Coeur d' Alene salamander (*Plethodon vandykei idahoensis*) in Idaho. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Boise, Idaho. 39 p.

Kovach, R., R. Leary, S. Painter, and A. Lodmell. 2019. Genetic letter to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (Report 5036-5048). University of Montana Conservation Genetics Laboratory. Division of Biological Sciences, Iniversity of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812.

Kreiner, R, and M. Terrazas. 2018. Thompson River Fisheries Investigation: A compilation Through 2017. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Thompson Falls, MT 59873.

Leary, R. 1994. Genetics letter to Joe Huston, July 12, 1994. University of Montana Conservation Genetics Laboratory, Division of Biological Sciences, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana.

Leary, R., S. Painter, and S. Amish. 2008. Genetics letter to Brian Sugden (87945), August 26, 2008. University of Montana Conservation Genetics Laboratory, Division of Biological Sciences, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 1999. Memorandum of understanding and conservation agreement for Westslope Cutthroat Trout (Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi) in Montana. Helena, Montana

Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. 2008. Montana Animal Species of Concern. Helena, MT: Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks. 17

Muhlfeld, C.C., R.P. Kovach, L.A. Jones, R. Al-Chokhachy, M.C. Boyer, R.F. Leary, W.H. Lowe, G. Luikart, and F.W. Allendorf. 2014. Invasive hybridization in a threatened species is accelerated by climate change. Nature Climate Change 4: 620-624.

Shepard, B.B. 2004. Factors that may be influencing nonnative brook trout invasion and their displacement of native Westslope Cutthroat Trout in three adjacent southwestern Montana streams. North American Journal of Fisheries Management. 24: 1088-1100.

Shepard, B.B., B.E. May, and W. Urie. 2005. Status and conservation of Westslope Cutthroat Trout within the western United States. North American Journal of Fisheries Management. 25: 1426-1440.

Wilson, A.G. Jr. 1991. A survey of the Avery Ranger District, Idaho Panhandle National Forests, for the Coeur d' Alene salamander (*Plethodon idahoensis*). Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program, Boise. 44 p.

PART III. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. LAND RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. **Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?		X				
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X			.	

The proposed action will have no effect on land resources.

2. AIR **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT ***					
	Unknown *	**None**	**Minor ***	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated ***	**Comment Index**
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. ***For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		NA				

The proposed action will have no effect on air quality.

3. WATER Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. *Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		NA				

m. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		NA				

The proposed action will have no impact on water quality.

4. VEGETATION **Will the proposed action result in?**	**IMPACT ***					
	Unknown *	**None**	**Minor ***	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated ***	**Comment Index**
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?		X				
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X				
f. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		NA				

The proposed action will have no impact on vegetation.

** 5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?				X Beneficial		5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X			5c
d. Introduction of new species into an area?				X Beneficial		5b
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?				X Beneficial		5f
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?		X				
h. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				5f
i. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)				X		5b

5b. The proposed action would increase secure habitat for Westslope Cutthroat Trout by up to 14 miles. Westslope Cutthroat Trout are a native species and a prized game fish which has experienced dramatic reductions in occupied stream miles, both range-wide and locally.

5c. Rock Mountain tailed frogs are present in all donor streams and may be preyed upon by introduced cutthroat trout. However, tailed frogs and trout co-exist throughout their range in Montana including all donor streams and receiving streams below the barriers.

5f. Bull Trout are present in the Thompson River including in one of the potential donor streams (Big Rock Creek). This species will experience no impacts from the proposed action.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

This project will have no noise/electrical impacts on the human environment.

7. LAND USE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

This project will have no impacts on land use.

8. RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				8a.
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		NA				

No hazardous materials would be used during this project.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT **Will the proposed action result in:**	**Unknown ***	**None**	**Minor ***	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated ***	**Comment Index**
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				

The proposed action will not have a significant community impact.

10. PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT ***					
	Unknown *	**None**	**Minor ***	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated ***	**Comment Index**
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				.
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. **Define projected revenue sources		X				
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.		X				

The proposed project would have no impact on public services, taxes or utilities.

** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. **Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		NA				

The proposed action will not have a significant on aesthetics/recreation.

12. CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		NA				

No groundbreaking activities that could disturb cultural resources would be initiated as part of this project.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)			X			13a.
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. ***For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. ****For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.						

13a. Donor populations will be contributing high numbers of native Westslope Cutthroat Trout to receiving streams for the duration of this project. However, it is believed that existing densities of fish are high enough (e.g., >250 WCT per 100 m in Chippy Creek) to withstand the removal of 100-500 fish per year for the next five years. Additionally, due to advancing hybridization in each donor population, action must be taken to secure these genetics.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The minor impacts to the environment that were identified in the previous section are small in scale and would not influence the overall environment of the immediate area. The proposed action would have beneficial cumulative effects for the target species, Westslope Cutthroat Trout, the state fish of Montana and one which has little to no secure habitat left in the Thompson River drainage. The preferred alternative would increase secure Westslope Cutthroat Trout habitat by up to 14 miles.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Describe the level of public involvement for this project, if any, and, given the complexity and the seriousness of the environmental issues associated with the proposed action, is the level of public involvement appropriate under the circumstances?

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on the Transfer of Westslope Cutthroat Trout in the Thompson River Watershed:

One public notice in each of these papers: the *Sanders County Ledger, Clark Fork Valley Press, Helena Independent Record,* and the *Missoulian*

- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: *http://fwp.mt.gov*.
- Direct notice will be given to adjacent landowners.
- Draft EA's will be available at the FWP Region 1 Headquarters in Kalispell and the Thompson Falls Field Office.
- A news release will be prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 1 issues.
- Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

If requested within the comment period, FWP will schedule and conduct a public meeting on this proposed project.

2. Duration of comment period.

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days following the publication of the legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., September 4th ,2020 and can be e-mailed to jblakney@mt.gov.

or mailed to the address below:

Thompson River Westslope Cutthroat Trout Transfer
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
5427 Highway 200
Thompson Falls, MT 59873
(406) 382-3033

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? NO
If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

Based on an evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment under MEPA, this environmental review revealed no significant negative impacts from the proposed action: therefore, an EIS is not necessary and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis. In determining the significance of the impacts, Fish, Wildlife and Parks assessed the severity, duration, geographic extent, and frequency of the impact, the probability that the impact would occur or reasonable assurance that the impact would not occur. FWP assessed the growth-inducing or growth-inhibiting aspects of the impact, the importance to the state and to society of the environmental resource or value effected, any precedent that would be set as a result of an impact of the proposed action that would commit FWP to future actions; and potential conflicts with local, federal, or state laws. As this EA revealed no significant impacts from the proposed actions, an EA is the appropriate level of review and an EIS is not required.

2. Persons responsible for preparing the EA:

Ryan Kreiner
Former Lower Clark Fork River Fisheries Biologist
5427 Highway 200
Thompson Falls, MT 59873
(406) 382-3033

3.List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:

-US Fish and Wildlife Service

-Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Fisheries Division
Wildlife Division

-Montana Natural Heritage Program

-Montana Tourism Board

APPENDICES

A. Tourism Report – Department of Commerce

Appendix A
TOURISM REPORT
MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) & MCA 23-1-110

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has initiated the review process as mandated by MCA 23-1-110 and the Montana Environmental Policy Act in its consideration of the project described below. As part of the review process, input and comments are being solicited. Please complete the project name and project description portions and submit this form to:

Jan Stoddard, Bureau Chief Industry Services and Outreach
Montana Office of Tourism
301 S. Park Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

Project Name: Thompson River Westslope Cutthroat Trout Transfer

Project Description: In order to preserve local genetics and increase secured habitat of Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to transfer pure Westslope Cutthroat Trout from populations threatened by hybridization into fishless streams above natural waterfall barriers. Over the next five years, FWP proposes to transfer up to 1,500 Westslope Cutthroat Trout from three donor populations into three fishless streams within the Thompson River drainage.

1. Would this site development project have an impact on the tourism economy?
   NO YES If YES, briefly describe:

   Yes, as described, the project has the potential to positively impact the tourism and recreation industry economy if properly maintained. Montana's 12.4 million non-residents (2018) spent nearly $3.6 billion in the state in 2018 (University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, 2019). Fishing is annually identified as a top five activity for visitors coming to Montana and the Westslope Cutthroat is the only native trout species in the rivers and streams of western Montana.

   A 2016 report from the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research states that Fishing/Fly Fishing was a "Top Outdoor Recreation Activity" reported by 12% of visitors to Montana in 2016. Additionally, the report also notes that nationwide participation in Outdoor Recreation specific to fishing is expected to increase in the coming decades. These recreational assets are essential to non-resident and resident travelers.

   This project would preserve local genetics and increase secured habitat of Westslope Cutthroat Trout. Over the next five years, FWP would transfer up to 1,500 Westslope Cutthroat Trout from up to four donor populations into three fishless streams within the Thompson River drainage.

2. Does this impending improvement alter the quality or quantity of recreation/tourism opportunities and settings?

NO YES If YES, briefly describe:

If successful, this project would create up to 14 miles of secure Westslope Cutthroat Trout habitat using localized genetics. Newly established populations would then contribute Westslope Cutthroat Trout to downstream fisheries, including the mainstem Thompson River, and could be used for future transfers to establish new populations. We are assuming the agency has determined it has necessary funding for the on-going operations and maintenance once this project is complete.

Signature *Jan Stoddard* Date: 4/30/20